

Think about which family member you are most like, then make a list of the similarities. Your list could include such things as physical features, mannerisms, character traits, and similarities in what you value. As you read "The Visitor," think about the relationship between the protagonist and his father.

The Visitor

Short Story by Christine Pinsent-Johnson

I was getting fed up with saying goodbye. One month five kids disappeared from my shrinking class at Copelin High School. At this rate, there would be a class of one graduating next year, and that one would be me.

I was witnessing the slow death of a town and there was nothing I, or anyone else, could do about it. All over the world people unite to fight for something they believe in, like preserving an old-growth forest or protecting the ozone. But no one bothered to fight for Copelin. My dad claimed people had simply accepted their fate; they knew the mines wouldn't last forever and now they realized it was time to move on.

Last night I overheard my parents talking about moving to St. John's or the mainland. At least my mom was talking; Dad was trying to avoid the discussion.

"The Greenes are leaving next month," Mom said casually while stirring the spaghetti sauce. "Frank got a job at the mill in Grand Falls."

I knew Mom wanted to leave as much as I did. The fridge was cluttered with want ads from the St. John's, Halifax, and Toronto newspapers.

"I guess we'll have to find someone else to play cards with," Dad said. His attempt to avoid the discussion.

"That's not the point. We're losing two more good friends." Mom stopped stirring and started rubbing her neck, which stiffened whenever she was upset. "This is really getting ridiculous," she said quietly. "Why don't you start looking . . ."

"We've already been through this, Joanne. I won't be able to find anything better than what I have."

Dad was sitting across the table from me. I kept staring at my biology textbook, hoping they would keep me out of it.

"I'm committed to stay here at least another couple of years," Dad said as he walked over to Mom. He gently placed her hands at her side and began massaging her neck. "You knew I wouldn't be able to find anything better."

Dad was one of the last people to work for the Copelin Mining and Refining Company, which had built the town over sixty years ago. He was the property manager for all the residential buildings, and spent his days running after people for overdue rent and closing up empty houses. About once every couple of months he actually sold a house. Usually it was to one of the retired miners and his wife, determined to stay here until they died.

But most of his days were spent knocking on doors, trying to convince unemployed miners and millworkers to pay months of back rent. Last winter he had to change the locks on two families, forcing them out of their homes. One family quickly left Copelin but the other ended up living with their relatives in the trailer park near the highway. They still won't talk to my dad. He never changed any more locks after that.

I had to leave. I couldn't stand another non-discussion about leaving Copelin.

"Where are you going?" Mom asked, when she saw me get up from the kitchen table. "Supper will be ready in half an hour."

"I'm going out. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Do you think it's a good idea to go out just before supper?" Dad asked, clearing his throat nervously.

Why can't he just say "Don't go out" or "Be back before supper," I thought. "I won't be long," I said, closing the textbook.

"Well, William, you said that the other day. Heh hemmm. And you were late for supper." I hated it when he used my full name. It sounded so fake. As if he was trying too hard.

"I'll be back before supper," I snapped, getting even more irritated. I could feel the sweat beading on my forehead in the steamy kitchen. The window beside the stove was dripping with condensation. I had to get out of there.

"Don't use that tone with your father," said Mom sharply.

Why does she have to stick up for him? Why can't he just say I'm being a brat and get it over with? I couldn't even look at him. I kept staring at the moisture droplets racing down the window.

"As long as you say you'll be back, I guess you can go."

"Gee, thanks Dad." I knew I was being a jerk but I couldn't help it.

As I grabbed my coat off the living room chair I heard Mom say, "You know, you really shouldn't let him talk to you like that." Unbelievable.

The night air was overwhelmed by the sharp, almost suffocating smell of pine smoke from people's wood stoves. It had been raining the past few days, and there was a hazy mixture of fog and wood smoke hanging over the town.



The Challenger-Bull Moose by Robert Bateman.

Most of the snow had washed away except for some skeletal remains along the edges of the street and in the ditches. Everyone kept saying they were lucky it was such a mild winter because there was no money for snow-plowing. But now the potholes needed to be filled, and there was no money for that either.

Out of a dozen homes on the street, five were empty. At the Purdys' house the front door was wide open, leaving the house exposed. I could look straight into the empty living room, where Mrs. Purdy used to sit and wait for her daughter, Michelle, after I walked her home from the dances at the stadium last summer. I ran up the front steps and quickly shut the door.

I turned onto Main Street, walked past the empty lot where the theatre used to be. It had burnt down along with the bowling alley and company store ten years ago. The company only rebuilt the store. They'd stopped showing movies at the theatre anyway, and said it was too expensive to rebuild the bowling alley. The only thing left besides the company store was the bank, post office, and Reid's Bakery, which didn't sell sweets any more, just bread and rolls.

Four streets ran perpendicular to Main. Three of these streets were filled with row houses, three units to a row, three bedrooms in a home. They were neat, orderly army-style homes, low on looks and high on efficiency. There was no grass in the yards, only rocks and weeds. Almost every home had a clothesline,

cutting across the back yard, supported by a cedar rail in the middle. The fourth street, which was ours, was a combination of row homes and small single houses that looked just like row houses, except for the metre gap in between. The bigger single homes were uptown, closer to the mine offices. They were for the geologists, engineers, and office employees. The miners with families lived downtown, and the men from around the bay lived in the bunk houses on the outskirts of town.

I should have been born twenty years ago when the mines were still running and the company took care of everything. There was no other place like Copelin in all of Newfoundland. For a small town, about 3,000 at its peak, Copelin had everything you'd find in a city like St. John's or Corner Brook. There was a movie theatre, restaurant, bowling alley, shooting range, swimming pool, playing fields, and a stadium. For years, Copelin had one of the best hockey teams on the island. The company would even pay for train tickets so fans could cheer on the team during road games. Now there wasn't even a hockey team. It wasn't fair.

In early spring Spruce first wandered into town. He was seen ambling silently down Main Street, stooping occasionally to munch the dandelions growing beside the road, as if he were doing nothing out of the ordinary. Mrs. Tilley saw him first, although she didn't know what she saw at the time. I heard her in the post office talking to a group of women.

"My dears, you're not going to believe what I saw last night," she said breathlessly. "I was out for my walk and when I rounded the corner of Ore Street I stared straight into the glaring red eyes of the devil itself."

The women in the post office passed knowing glances to each other and smiled politely. Mrs. Tilley was known for spending long nights at the union hall and staggering home just before her husband woke up.

"You must have been frightened," said the postmaster from behind the counter.

Mrs. Tilley didn't seem to notice his mocking tone. "My dears, I nearly jumped out of me skin. Them eyes was some creepy, and he didn't even move. I just backed up slow so I wouldn't startle him. Then I high-tailed it home."

At first everyone thought Mrs. Tilley had had one too many until Reverend Sharpe saw Spruce a couple of days later. The devil which appeared in front of Mrs. Tilley was actually a young bull moose. This time, he was spotted downtown, sniffing around the trash bins behind the company store.

Then later that same morning, Daisy Miller said she saw Spruce in the empty lot beside the bank, where the theatre once stood. He was again nuzzling through the trash cans.

After the first sightings people began to see Spruce a couple of times a week. It was Daisy Miller who started calling him Spruce. Ten years ago her

Uncle Spruce and a few other men rescued a moose that had fallen through the ice on Beothuk Lake. It was Spruce Miller who crawled across the ice to lasso the semi-conscious moose, which they tied to a bulldozer from one of the mines, and hauled out.

I first saw Spruce a few days later. He began to get a little bolder and wandered into town during the late afternoons. He usually came out of the bush at the north end of town around three o'clock, as if he was waiting for a polite time to come calling.

I was struggling with the last question on a math test. Looking out the classroom window for some divine inspiration, I saw Spruce strolling through the school yard. I watched him in silence, hoping no one else would notice him. There were only five other students in my grade ten class. Ever since I was in grade six the school board had been threatening to close the school and bus everyone into the nearest town, an hour's drive up the highway.

Spruce was taking his time, obviously having no destination in mind. He was a picture of contradictions. His long spindly legs looked like they would break under his round bulk of a body. His soft brown eyes were overwhelmed by a massive snout which ended with a flapping upper lip, and his ears looked too small for his long, narrow face. His antlers were just beginning to grow and were covered with a velvety soft fuzz. I was surprised to see how gracefully he moved. I always thought moose were awkward-looking and clumsy, with their long, homely faces and humped backs.

I'd seen a couple of moose before, slung over the hood of a car after being hit on the highway or in the back of a pickup after hunting. My father was probably the only man in Copelin who didn't hunt, so I'd never seen a moose in the wild.

Just that morning, I'd overheard Albert Smith talking to Amanda Higgins, the bank teller, about the moose's lack of intelligence.

"He must be some stunned to come wandering into a town full of hunters," said Mr. Smith on the steps of the company store. "Don't he realize people here live all winter on a freezer full of his distant relatives?"

Amanda Higgins' double chin shook in agreement, "Maybe he's one of them backward moose. Maybe he's brain-injured."

"He'll be brain-injured if he don't quit eating my flowers. Sure, last week I found all my tulips stripped bare. I woulda' got my shotgun and killed him right then and there if I'd caught him."

Amanda Higgins' chins jiggled with excitement. They looked like the dewlap under Spruce's chin. "Yes bye. I knows I'd be hollerin' after him if I caught him in my garden. The animal's got no sense. No sense at all."

But not everyone thought Spruce was a nuisance. People began to set out treats for him, including my father. Rumour was he ate all the Purity Lemon Creams but left the carrots. Every time a sighting was made, Dad would run

into the kitchen, grab a handful of biscuits and a couple of apples and set them on the back porch. One night I heard him walking around the back yard just after 2 a.m. He was calling out to the night, "Come on Spruce my son. I've got your favourites here."

I don't know if Spruce ever came that night. Dad was still out there when I fell asleep and neither of us said anything the next morning.

When I walked in the door after playing road hockey in front of Dave Rideout's place, the first thing I heard was the booming voice of Reverend Sharpe. He and Dave's father were having a cup of coffee with Dad in the kitchen. The two of them were on the town council; Mr. Rideout was the mayor and the Reverend was a councillor.

"He's getting to be a nuisance," said Reverend Sharpe. "Last week he dug up three flower gardens, eating up people's hard work and enjoyment."

"I heard he's been dragging people's trash all over their yards," said the mayor. "What happens if he ever gets aggressive and goes after one of the kids? You know kids. A little harmless teasing and in a second they could have a two-ton moose chasing after them."

"Sure, I heard Fanny Reid nearly ran into him as she rounded the corner of Main Street in her car the other evening. There he was standing in the middle of the road, refusing to budge," said the Reverend.

"It's our responsibility to do something before someone gets hurt," added the mayor. He was looking straight at my father, waiting for his input. The mayor often stopped by to discuss council issues with my dad. I guess my dad had a certain status in the town as one of the last company employees. Dad also gave the mayor an ego boost, since he would never disagree with him.

My father remained silent. I could see him swallowing, his Adam's apple bulging, as he prepared to clear his throat. But he didn't say anything. He didn't always agree with everything the mayor and Reverend did on council, like the decision to stop subsidizing the summer baseball league, but he went along with them anyway.

Come on, say something, I silently urged from the hall. I knew he disagreed with them. He'd set out at least two bags of apples and three packages of biscuits since Spruce started visiting regularly. I could feel myself turn red when I heard him clear his throat. I slowly backed down the hall and went upstairs to my room.

The mayor called a town meeting to discuss Spruce. Once people found out that the mayor was thinking about getting rid of the moose they began to take sides. It was all they could talk about for a week. Petitions were sent around and signs were posted in front yards and along fences, some saying *Let Him*

Be and others saying *He's Got To Go*. I'd never seen people get so worked up over something. No one protested this much when the mines closed.

The council meeting was moved from the municipal office, a small room in the basement of the library, to the union hall so everyone could attend. There was a reporter from the St. John's newspaper, which never before bothered with small town council meetings. The reporter wasn't much older than me. He didn't even try to hide his boredom, just yawned and doodled in his steno book.

The moose issue was shuffled to the bottom of the evening's agenda. I think the mayor hoped people would get bored and leave the meeting before it ended. His nerves were frazzled, speaking in front of so many people, and he kept shuffling the papers in front of him. He'd never seen so many bodies at a council meeting. The only people who usually attended the meetings were a couple of old-timers with nothing better to do and the editor of the town paper.

My father asked me to go to the meeting with him. He said it was an important issue for the town, and it went beyond a simple decision to let Spruce stay or to force him out. I agreed to go partly because I was feeling guilty for the way I had been treating him the past few weeks.

After passing motions to recruit another volunteer firefighter, start collecting a dog tax, and approve a letter requesting the donation of library books, they finally reached the end of the agenda. A group of men, followed by a haze of their own cigarette smoke, stepped into the stifling hall, and everyone else stopped shuffling and whispering.

The discussion about Spruce started off respectfully enough. Representatives from both sides of the issue carefully stated their case as we sat in silence. My father looked over at me once, and started to smile but changed his mind and looked down at a piece of folded up paper he was holding.

The mayor, in an attempt at a compromise, asked the audience, "Why don't we get one of them tranquilizer guns, knock him out and let him go somewhere one hundred kilometres from here?"

A man in the back stood up. I'd seen him before, standing outside the Legion every afternoon, waiting for it to open. "We're some stunned to be sitting here arguing about this moose. Why don't we just kill it and get a nice bunch of steaks out of him."

"Yes, bye, we do that and we'll have them peace freaks and animal rights activists accusing us of cruelty to animals," said a woman from the middle of the crowd.

"What harm is he doing to ye. I say we just let him do his thing and leave him alone. It's the proper thing," said Mrs. Tilley. Her husband sat beside her shaking his head.

Then one of the old-timers jumped up and yelled, "Kill him before he tramples some poor child." Someone else in the back yelled, "Let the poor thing alone."

The St. John's reporter jerked his head up and began writing madly. Then everyone got into it. People were yelling back and forth at each other. The mayor kept banging his gavel on the table, but everyone ignored him. The reporter stopped his frantic writing for an instant to take a picture of the mayor yelling at everyone to shut up.

In the middle of the yelling and screaming my father stood up slowly. He never said a word in any sort of public meeting. I wanted to slip into the cracks of the floor and disappear. He unfolded his piece of paper and looked at it quickly. Then he folded it back up and held it tightly in his hand. The people around us stopped talking and looked at my father. Like a wave, silence gradually fell over the rest of the hall. He just stood there, waiting, gripping on to that piece of paper as if it gave him the strength to stand.

He quietly cleared his throat. His first words didn't quite make it out. Someone yelled, "Speak up, we can't hear you." He stopped. I thought he'd pack it in right there. But he didn't. He looked over at me. I couldn't help it, but I turned my eyes away and stared at my shoes.

He began again, a little louder this time, "Spruce has done something for this town that no one has seen for years."

"Yeah, he's picked up the garbage regularly," some wisecracker yelled out.

"Uh, that's not my point," said Dad quietly. He started to unfold his paper and look at his notes. He was totally thrown off.

"Tell them about the treats," I whispered. "Tell them about all the times you and other people set out treats for Spruce, like it was Christmas or something." Dad looked down at me, nodded his head slightly and smiled. Then he released his grip on the paper and let it fall to the floor. I thought he had dropped it and when I bent down to pick it up he whispered, "Leave it there."

He began again. This time his voice was loud enough the first time. "How many of us have run into our kitchens to find special treats for Spruce every time he was spotted in town? When is the last time you felt that same excitement about something?"

I looked up at him, hoping he would see that I was listening to every word.

"Spruce has given us all a little hope, something almost magical, during a time when we don't have much of anything that's good." A few people in front of us were nodding in agreement. "I think it would be a foolish idea to get rid of him. I think we should just let him be." Dad didn't waste any time sitting down. People were still looking at him but he didn't acknowledge their stares.

I could tell people were stunned. No one said a word for a few seconds. The mayor screwed up his face as if he had a bad taste in his mouth. The Reverend shrugged his shoulders and sighed. Once people digested everything an excited buzz spread throughout the union hall. I caught bits and pieces of the conversations around us.

"Maybe he's got a point."

"I can't believe Graham Percy stood up and . . ."

"But what if Spruce . . ."

"I've never heard him say that much at one time."

People were talking as much about my dad as they were about Spruce, but I didn't care. I reached down and picked up the crumpled paper my dad had dropped and put it in my pocket.

"Thanks for your help, Willy," he said.

"You would have done fine without me. People really listened to what you had to say." I looked straight at him. For the first time I noticed the flecks of gold in his deep brown eyes. I had those same flecks.

"You think so?" He really didn't know. It was like he was a kid looking for someone to say he did the right thing.

"I know so," I said.

A week later council passed a special by-law protecting Spruce, and he was allowed to wander throughout the town freely. The newspaper article from the St. John's reporter ended up being reprinted in *The Globe and Mail*. Then early in June a CBC crew from St. John's did a piece about Spruce and troubled times for Copelin. Our forgotten town ended up being on the national news with the help of Spruce!

That summer my dad and a couple of other people, including the mayor, formed the C.C.C., the Citizens' Coalition for Copelin. They helped people get low-interest loans from the government so they could afford to buy their homes. People began painting their houses again, the sidewalks were fixed, and some of the potholes were repaired. Copelin would never be the same as it once was, but at least it wouldn't become a forgotten ghost town, and maybe I wouldn't be the only one left by the time I graduated from high school.

1. Exploring Meaning

- a. Describe the relationship between Willy and his father, Graham.

Why do you think Willy reacts the way he does to his father?

- b. In what ways is Willy like his father?
- c. How did Graham Percy explain all the fuss about Spruce? Do you think he is right? Why or why not?
- d. Do you believe that Spruce was the saviour of the town? Explain.
- e. What is the **irony** in the story?

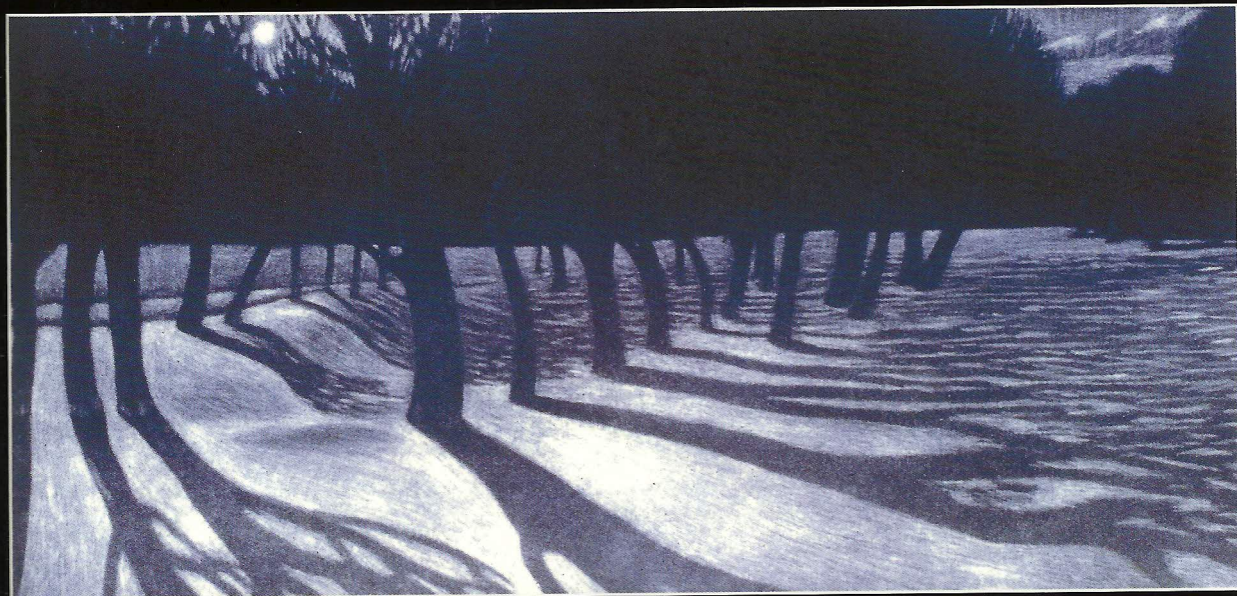
Irony occurs when a statement or situation means something different from (or even the opposite of) what is expected.

gagelarning



PASSAGES

LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE



ILLINGWORTH | GIROUX | SIAMON | STOWE | RICKER-WILSON | YAN

literature and language